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A NEW PLAN FOR HIGH-SCHOOL DEBATING IN MONTANA

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The Montana State High-School Debate League is conducted under the auspices of the State University at Missoula. The president is a member of the University faculty. With the co-operation of a faculty committee and a committee of high-school principals he looks after the executive work of the League. The final contest of the League is held at Missoula in May of each year in connection with the state interscholastic meet. To this meet all accredited high schools of the state are permitted to send, at the expense of the University, representatives for the declamatory and athletic contests.

Until last year the Debate League held a series of elimination contests, with a final state contest between the two remaining undefeated teams. Last year, however, a change was inaugurated as a result of certain valid objections which principals of different accredited high schools had been making from time to time. The first of these objections was that of expense. Montana is a very large state, still sparsely settled. Elimination contests covering half the state necessitated long trips with attendant heavy expenses to be met by the competing high schools. This in itself prohibited many of the smaller high schools from entering. Then there was the objection that such a system took too much of the energy of the pupils representing the winning teams. And, finally, the two teams in the field contest, with their "canned" speeches and at least partially "canned" rebuttals, often gave the audience an exhibition, not primarily of a debating, but of an oratorical, contest.

In view of these objections the following change was made. There was only one series of state high-school debates. For this the schools were paired off on the basis of convenience and expense. The one set of debates in this series—called local state contests—

occurred between the first of November and the first of March. Each of the winning high schools was entitled to select one of its team to send as its debating representative (at the expense of the University) to the interscholastic meet in May. The selection of its representative from the team was left to the discretion of each school. A different question from that debated in the local contest was assigned for the final state contest. Since the local contests closed on March 1 and the state contest took place on May 10, the representatives in the state contest had almost two months and a half to study the question. For the final contest ten schools were eligible, though only eight entered.

These representatives did not know until after they came to Missoula upon which side of the question they were to debate. At noon of the day of the final contest they were called together and paired off by lot in groups of two, one half on the affirmative and one half on the negative. The slip which the contestant drew indicated the issue on which he and his opponent were to argue. Thus, with the question, "*Resolved*, That the United States should own and operate all interstate railroads," the first group had the issue, "Is the present system adequate?" the second group, "Would government ownership and operation make for better regulation and administration of interstate railroads?" the third group, "Would government ownership be better for the public?" and the fourth group, "Is government ownership practicable?" This analysis was made by individuals outside the competing schools. At this preliminary conference a definition of interstate railroads, which was afterward printed on the programs for the audience, was agreed upon. Following this conference, the debaters had the afternoon for the organization or reorganization of their material. They were at liberty to secure further information from any source, but were pledged on their honor not to secure any help in the organization, arrangement, or delivery of their material. Certain tables in the reading-room of the University library were reserved for the use of the contestants during the afternoon.

At the contest each affirmative speaker in the series of pairs had five minutes in which to present his direct argument and three

minutes for rebuttal, which was given after his opponent left the floor. Each negative speaker devoted the first three minutes of his time to rebuttal and the last five to direct argument. The negative speaker had a two-minute interval after the affirmative closed in which to complete his preparation for rebuttal. No group of speakers heard those who preceded them. As soon as the speakers in one group had finished, they left the stage and the next group came on. No decision was given on the question itself. Judgment was based purely on individual merit, and contestants were ranked first, second, third, etc., as in the other interscholastic events. If there had been an odd number of contestants, according to the arrangements, there would have been three contestants in one series, one on the affirmative and two on the negative.

On the whole, the standard of debating was only mediocre, though two or three of the contestants did remarkably well in both main argument and rebuttal. But the results, I think, justified the experiment. At the annual meeting of the Debate League the morning after the contest, the sentiment expressed by the high-school principals—even among those who had been skeptical—was that it gave the high-school pupils the kind of training in debate that they needed. The only changes made by them for next year were a provision for dividing the state into districts so that there would never be more than ten contestants in the final debate, and one providing seven minutes for direct argument and four for rebuttal.